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Connection and mediation in the Antarctic work of Douglas Mawson and Alan Villiers

Alessandro Antonello

In the winter of 2021, the people of Adelaide were disthallasised – oceanically disoriented – by their city’s main newspaper. The *Sunday Mail* reported on an old name being newly affixed by the US-based National Geographic Society to its maps: they would now be labelling the expanse of ocean south of 60° south latitude as the Southern Ocean. For Australians, this decision was a curious and vexing one, for they have named the waters lapping their southern shores the Southern Ocean for generations. Instead, if the National Geographic Society was to be believed, Australia’s southern coastline to the west of Hobart was now washed by the Indian Ocean. The *Sunday Mail* wondered if that changed definition had ‘left us adrift’ (Davies, 2021).

In the Australian imagination – and even the broader global imagination – the Southern Ocean’s geographies and boundaries are unstable, always being made and unmade. In late 1841, half a decade after the invasion and settlement of South Australia, a committee studying the local whaling industry noted the colony’s proximity to the ‘Great Southern Ocean’, the home of the whales (Hart et al., 1842). A century and a half later, the artist–author Barbara Hanrahan in *The Scent of Eucalyptus* – her 1973 semi-autobiographical novel of childhood life in late-1940s and 1950s Adelaide – wrote of looking from the city outwards to ‘the blue that is the Indian Ocean, edged with the names of seaside towns that sound of England and poetry: Semaphore and Tennyson, Grange and Henley, Glenelg and Brighton, Seacliff and Marine Rocks’ (Hanrahan, 1973, p. 80).

In the decades that Hanrahan was growing up and later writing of her youth, scientists were increasingly using the Southern Ocean in a specific way. In the middle third of the twentieth century, oceanographers and marine biologists understood that the cold and tempestuous ocean flowing around the whole Antarctic continent was a distinct body of water and habitat. This they named the Southern

Ocean (Antonello, 2018). Bounded to its north by the Antarctic Convergence (known more recently as the Polar Front) separating the warmer waters to the north from its colder waters, the Southern Ocean becomes covered in sea ice during winter and plays an important role in ensuring the Antarctic continent's thermal isolation. The Southern Ocean is one of solid as well as liquid water; the ice, in the form of sea ice or icebergs, is both stationary and mobile, at once massive and impenetrable as well as ephemeral and fragile (Riffenburgh, 2007, pp. 234–239, 741–744, 934–956).

Whatever its name or precise boundaries, part of this ocean has been a space of Australian imagination and exertions since the British invasion and colonisation of the continent in 1788 (Antonello, 2018; McCann, 2018). As Tom Griffiths has put it, in the nineteenth century, 'Encountering and surviving these wild westerlies on the Southern Ocean was a rite of passage for all newcomers to Australia, a dimension of their new identity' (Griffiths, 2007, p. 34). From the nineteenth century to the present, Australian scientists, government officials, entrepreneurs, and workers have gone into the ocean with ideas of geopolitically, spatially, and culturally placing Australia at the heart of a larger southern and oceanic region. It is their ideas and experiences which many Australians have drawn upon to vicariously encounter the Southern Ocean. This is a terraqueous history, since the Southern Ocean is not simply a watery space, but a region of land and sea, and the 'atmospheres, vapours, airs, and waters' constantly connecting them (Bashford, 2017, p. 255). It is terraqueous because this is an ocean being claimed as territory too (Bashford, 2017, p. 261).

To explicate the connected logics of possession and protection that have characterised the Australian relationship with the Southern Ocean, this chapter concentrates on two figures covering the early decades of the twentieth century. It looks to the geologist and explorer Douglas Mawson and his expansionist and technological rhetoric and oceanic boundary work from the 1910s to 1930s. It looks also to the writer and one-time whaler Alan Villiers, whose journalistic account of a Norwegian whaling voyage in 1923–4 – and the presence of a small group of Australians on it – enthused the Australian reading public.

Through them we can explore oceanic connections, boundaries, and media. Connectivity is a central theme of oceanic histories, especially in terms of connections outside state and national borders (Bashford, 2021, pp. 923–924). For Australia, the Southern Ocean is a space of connections framed and inflected by the (emergent) nation and state. For a nation without land borders, oceanic spaces and boundaries are among the sites where Australians meet others – neighbours and strangers, both welcome and unwelcome, whether through the boundary making with New Zealand, France, or Indonesia prescribed by international law, or through those 'working' the seas, whether fishing or people smuggling. Thus, the Southern Ocean is not merely connected with Australia in a sense of proximity, but connects Australians to the world, indeed to the planet, since the ocean, as Charity Edwards figures it, is 'vast, mobile, interconnected with all places, systems and processes of this Earth'

(Edwards, 2019, p. 313). Moreover, these connections are not merely spatial or social but temporal. Telecommunications – first, wireless radio telegraphy from ships and stations used both to maintain basic contact as well as to disseminate news and generate publicity and, from the 1970s, satellite communications and remote sensing to collect vast troves of geophysical data – create a space of simultaneity, an ocean continuous with the Australian continent and nation, an ocean in which ships, weather, animals, and sea ice can be tracked and which allows relations in (near) real time.

The themes of media and mediation also flow through connections. The Southern Ocean, like all oceans, is thoroughly mediated and mediated. Those perceptual chains are not simply in human media but ‘milieu-specific’, as specific environments mediate sense and meaning, as Melody Jue argues (2020, p. 3). If Antarctic and Southern Ocean histories have important, even defining, elements of isolation, the modern Australian nation’s relationship with the Southern Ocean has been connected by telecommunication technologies. This mediation cultivates both proximity and distance. There is ‘a wide range of visual, conceptual, political and legal representations’, suggests Edwards, but these keep the Southern Ocean ‘at-a-distance: encountered mainly through highly curated reportage or controlled science communications’, which are ‘romantic imperialist, techno-utopian and depoliticised myths that do little to share the diverse ecologies, sensations and imaginaries within this vast territory’ (Edwards, 2019, p. 313). But as Rohan Howitt clearly articulates, Antarctica, even before its thorough exploration, was consistently present in late-nineteenth-century Australian newspapers, made close and proximate in the press, testifying to a rich world of Australian ideas about the Southern Ocean and Antarctica (Howitt, 2019). Both Mawson and Villiers understood the power of the press, and their communication of their sensations and feelings within the oceanic milieu through the press via wireless radio was central to Australia’s place in the Southern Ocean.

* * *

In the first half of the twentieth century, Australians turned to the geologist and explorer Douglas Mawson to be their guide and interpreter of the Southern Ocean and Antarctic. English-born, Australian-raised, and University of Sydney-trained, Mawson’s fame grew after his first journey to Antarctica as part of Ernest Shackleton’s 1907–9 British Antarctic Expedition, on which he became one of the first party to find the location of the south magnetic pole. Soon after he returned from that first Antarctic visit, Mawson began to organise an Australian expedition under his own leadership – that expedition would depart in 1911 as the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). In his justifications for a national Australian expedition, Mawson articulated a vision of the south – a frontier region of ocean, land, and ice – for white settler Australians to occupy, know, and exploit (Hains, 2002). That vision remained remarkably consistent across his decades of scientific work and advocacy.

When Mawson began to articulate his plans for his own Antarctic and Oceanic expeditionary work, the Australian public had a range of ideas and traditions of

public discussion to play with (Howitt, 2019; Kawaja, 2010). Ferdinand von Mueller, among the most prominent scientists in Victorian and Australian colonial society in the late nineteenth century, saw the Antarctic and Southern Ocean as a field of Australian exploratory efforts. His vision, particularly articulated in the mid-1880s, saw Antarctica within a larger geographical and regional frame, associated with the exploration of the Australian continent, New Guinea, and Pacific islands. He was a proponent of economic botany and other useful sciences and hoped that scientific travels in southern latitudes would garner useful animals and minerals for Australians to exploit. Mueller's interventions and dreams inaugurated a more serious public discussion about sending an Australian expedition to Antarctica, although this dream did not see fruition until Mawson's 1911 journey (Home et al., 1992, pp. 392–395).

At the turn of the twentieth century, J. W. Gregory, the short-lived professor of geology and mineralogy at the University of Melbourne (1900–4), also offered a substantive vision of Australia in the Southern Ocean. In a major lecture to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1904, Gregory spoke of the Australian climate as being controlled by the Southern Ocean – a terraqueous hemisphere. With words and maps, he described the current state of knowledge – and more significantly, ignorance – of the ocean, the intimate links between the Australian continent and the sea, and the climatic and weather cycles shared by ocean and continent. For Gregory, the ties binding Australia and ocean stretched across several time units, from days, to seasons, to years. Anyone listening to or reading Gregory's lecture could not have doubted either the geophysical importance of the Southern Ocean for Australia or the idea that it should be Australians at the vanguard of inhabiting it (Gregory, 1904).

Mawson was sympathetic to these visions of useful science, resource rationalism, and climate connections, deploying them regularly in his Antarctic boosterism. The Southern Ocean in Mawson's and his supporters' vision at this time was at once national and imperial. In the early twentieth century, Australians considered themselves both Britons and Australians. This perpetuated expansionist and imperialist Australian ideas about Antarctica and the south that had developed during the nineteenth century (Howitt, 2019). One of the plans of Mawson's AAE was to write and print a newspaper during their winter confinement at their Antarctic base – a publication that came to be named *The Adelie Blizzard*. It was an outlet for the expeditioners to mediate their own thoughts and experiences and planned as a tool of publicity upon their return north. In May 1913, to mark Empire Day – a jingoistic celebration of the British Empire on Queen Victoria's birthday – one of the men, likely Archie McLean, reflected on their place in empire: 'The twentieth century Empire has a gigantic body . . . her heart has diffused into the multitude of clear-eyed stubborn pioneers who have plunged into the mystery of the "wild" and built up the Colonial Dominions'. Expeditions were one way of preserving and advancing the Empire, 'British tradition', and 'manly sentiment'; the British Empire 'vitalises the world with the purest ideals!' (McLean et al., 2010, p. 29).

A crucial potential benefit to Australia and the broader British Empire lay in exploitable resources. Mawson was always conscious that his explorations and scientific research should lead to useful knowledge (Shaughnessy & Pharaoh, 2021). As a geologist, he was part of a long scientific tradition of seeking knowledge of the Earth for the benefit of humanity. Part of his justification for the AAE was that the Southern Ocean ‘abounds in whale and seal life, and if we can establish convenient harbours or discover sub-Antarctic islands there is sure to follow commercial enterprise on these lines’ (Mawson, 1911, p. 617). He spent the winter of 1913 writing articles on Antarctica’s ‘commercial resources’ for *The Adelie Blizzard*. Four long articles between May and October described whales, seals, and penguins – an entirely orthodox account of whales and seals and the products humans made from them, but nevertheless central to his, and the larger public’s, imagining of the Southern Ocean. From early on, though, Mawson was sensitive to over-exploitation, as were many others. Of sealing, he called attention to the early nineteenth-century ‘rape’ of South Georgia’s fur seals (McLean et al., 2010, p. 122). In later years, he would point to the depredations on animal and bird populations at Macquarie Island, noting that ‘the hand of man has alas! cast a shadow over [the Island’s] myriad inhabitants, and wrought irreparable havoc’. He argued that Australia should possess these territories, for it was only Australia that would ‘ensure the continuance of species’ (Mawson, 1922, p. 40). For Mawson, wildlife protection and wise-use conservation would be achieved through Australian possession.

In a time of rapid technological change, Mawson also saw the place of new technologies in allowing an Australian presence in the Southern Ocean. The emergent technology of radio was crucial for him (Hains, 2002, pp. 49–52; for the larger global context, see Wenzlhuemer, 2016, pp. 171–173). While ideas of Australian–Antarctic proximity had an older valence, for Mawson, the fact that the region was ‘within wireless telegraphic distance of our borders’ meant that ‘this region has a special call upon Australasians’ (Mawson, 1911, p. 610). Wireless radio underpinned something like a simultaneity for the whole area. It was not simply that news of heroic deeds could be beamed across the ocean for the entertainment or edification of Australians, but that the radio would allow a real expression of the climatic unity of the southern hemisphere, as prefigured by J. W. Gregory. ‘Wireless weather stations’, Mawson thought, would be important for ‘Australasian weather reports’ (Mawson, 1911, p. 617). The first edition of *The Adelie Blizzard* in April 1913 carried news of the first wireless message from Antarctica – a great feat in their eyes, achieved in spite of the ‘terrific blizzards’ they lived with. Mawson and the other expedition members thought that the wireless would allow rapid dissemination of new scientific knowledge – and indeed, receipt of new scientific knowledge while expeditioning (McLean et al., 2010, pp. 16–17).

Returning to Australia in late 1913, Mawson’s expedition was hailed for its geographical and scientific achievements, as well as his heroic feats and survival. The expedition was defined by its tragedy, since Mawson’s two sledging mates, Xavier

Mertz and Belgrave Ninnis, died on their journey – Mawson’s survival seemed miraculous. Within a year, though, the nature of heroism and geopolitics would change forever, with the beginning of war in Europe. Attention would turn away from the Southern Ocean and Antarctica towards the front lines.

After the war’s end in 1918, attention began to turn once more towards the south. Mawson resumed his place as a leading interpreter of the frozen region – touring, lecturing, and writing constantly – although he was not the only man that Australia turned to for expertise on the Southern Ocean in the interwar years. In the whaling industry and whalers’ labours, we find a less remembered but important moment in Australia’s inhabitation of the Southern Ocean. In November 1923, the mothership of the Ross Sea Whaling Company, *Sir James Clark Ross*, sailed up the Derwent River to dock at Hobart. The company was led by the famed Norwegian whale magnate Carl Anton Larsen, who had pioneered the industry at South Georgia from 1904, which had inaugurated a half century of slaughter that drove whale populations to the brink of extinction. Larsen was hoping to profitably expand his operations to Antarctica’s Ross Sea, to the south of New Zealand (Basberg, 2007). The arrival of the *Sir James Clark Ross* in Hobart was greeted by the local paper, *The Mercury*, as a near world-historical event. The newspaper greeted the ship as ranking alongside ‘world-famous vessels’ like *Fram* and *Terra Nova*, which had carried the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Briton Robert Scott on their race to be first to the south pole (Anon., 1923).

In port it met a Hobart public enthusiastic for oceanic life. The city had been a hub of whaling in the early nineteenth century, in the decades after the invasion and colonisation of lutruwita (Tasmania). From it, whalers sailed to hunt near Australian shores or came into port for provisioning during longer hunting journeys. In the 1920s, Tasmanian parliamentarians and aldermen wanted business for their small state, working men wanted work (some wanted a bit of adventure too, to go with it), and a reading public was eager for stories. The docks bustled with onlookers, hungry for connection with a world-straddling ship destined for the South’s ice-choked seas.

Alan Villiers was one young man who launched himself upon the Southern Ocean by joining the ship’s company. Born in Melbourne in 1903, he had been enchanted by the city’s port and docks from his youth: at 11 years of age, he tried to join one of the square-rigged barques docking there. While in later life he spun myth and mystery around his youth, he probably joined his first ship in January 1920, not yet aged 17. After a few years sailing the world ocean, he fell from high on a ship in Port Lincoln, South Australia. Following his serious injury, he eventually found himself in Hobart at the start of 1923 and with a job at the city’s newspaper, *The Mercury* (Lance, 2009, chapters 1–2).

When Villiers saw *Sir James Clark Ross* and its five attendant whale catchers, *Star I* to *Star V*, sail up the Derwent River, he signed on at once as a whaler’s labourer. At first, he had little thought of writing about his experiences on the whaling ship in Antarctica, chasing only the seagoing experience in treacherous

and barely plied waters. But he convinced his employer, although he was neither a journalist nor an author, to publish some of his reports. He cabled news of the Ross Sea Whaling Expedition's movements and successes throughout the voyage.

Towards the end of the whaling expedition, Villiers' report from New Zealand, published on 5 April 1924, caught the public's attention. His story, first published in *The Mercury* and then syndicated more widely, led the newspaper to commission more articles (Villiers, 1924b). Between 10 and 28 May 1924, he published a fifteen-article series on his voyage from Hobart to the Ross Sea via Macquarie Island and returning to New Zealand via the Campbell Islands. The series was syndicated on the mainland too, where the *Sydney Sun*, *Adelaide Register*, *Melbourne Herald*, and *Brisbane Courier* ran the series for a hungry public. So popular was the series that a book of the articles was produced in Hobart, which Villiers later revised and enlarged for an American publisher (Villiers, 1924h, 1931).

Between December 1923 and February 1924, short bursts of words were wirelessly despatched from the Southern Ocean: the sightings, or lack of sightings, of whales; encounters with ice; and the struggles of navigation. Nearing the end of the voyage, Villiers telegraphed: 'Probably this was the most extensive, the fastest, and the most daring voyage ever made in this region' (Villiers, 1924a). For his Australian audience, Villiers wrote of an ocean with Australians in it, but not within an especially nationalist frame. The eleven Australians on board worked alongside the mighty 'Norsemen', the Norwegians who comprised most of the workers on the world's whaling ships. The Australians were participating in 'the most interesting, most spectacular, and at the same time, the most dangerous of all maritime pursuits' on a ship with 'the most powerful wireless installation afloat in any merchant vessel' (Villiers, 1924c). It was only in the last article in his series that he reflected of the eleven Australians that 'they manfully upheld the honour of their own young Australian flag down there in that terrible waste of ice and gale' (Villiers, 1924g).

In the Ross Sea – 'the coldest and stormiest sea in the world, and the literal end of the world of waters' (Villiers, 1924c) – Villiers was attentive to the atmospheres and colours about him in the 'foamy' seas (Villiers, 1924d). The vista was not always only blue and white; sometimes green and brown water and ice intruded. The ship was 'harassed' by 'heavy ice fogs'; 'clouds of frost-smoke' made the water seem 'afire' (Villiers, 1924e). The bloody thrashing of the harpooned whale turned the ocean into a 'seething cauldron' (Villiers, 1924f) – another medium pervading the terraqueous world, another milieu of sensations.

The Hobart public devoured Villiers' narrative. The descriptions of hard work, challenging nature, wondrous animals, and brutal slaughter excited readers. At a public reception in June 1924, the head of the Tasmanian Marine Board remarked upon the reception of Villiers' despatches:

In one instance a housewife, who usually in the evening took down the Bible from the shelf and read a chapter, picked up "The Mercury" during the currency of the articles, and read about the Frozen South. (Laughter.) He [the Marine

Board head] had asked a friend the other day if he happened to be reading them, and the answer was, “I can’t get my ‘Mercury,’ as the maid in the kitchen gets it first, and by the time she has read the Frozen South article I have no opportunity of doing so.” (Laughter.)

(Anon., 1924)

Through Villiers, Hobartians and Australians had felt Antarctica’s ‘proximity’ (Anon., 1924). His writings allowed for a cultural consumption of the whales and the ocean, just as the whalers were commodifying the ocean and its denizens in more literal, material ways.

Villiers was not the only Australian to join the Norwegian whaling ships in the Ross Sea. Between 1923 and 1931, two Norwegian companies used Hobart as a port to access the Ross Sea whaling fields. The first was Larsen’s Ross Sea Whaling Company until 1926, followed by the Polaris Whaling Company with the *N.T. Nielsen-Alonso* – 132 young Australians, mostly Tasmanians, joined the predominantly Norwegian crews to hunt whales in the tempestuous Southern Ocean across eight voyages (Stoddart, 2017). Work on a whaling ship was gruelling and dangerous. The blue humanities must keep the labouring body of the sailor present in its analysis (Blum, 2015, p. 27); the working class have a place in Australia’s Southern Ocean history, although very much under-studied (Maddison, 2014).

Only some who followed Villiers chose to write of their work. Before the 1924–5 season the need for whalers was ‘flashed on the screens at all the picture theatres’ in Hobart, prompting ‘three or four adventurous youths to hazard the trip’ (Tilley, 1925a). Athol Tilley, who had joined Villiers on the first voyage, re-joined with plans to make a film of the trip, taking with him 10,000 feet of film. Although that film did not eventuate, he published six articles in *The Mercury* on his return. Tilley explored the prospect that the industry he was participating in might wipe out the whales; Villiers, by contrast, was clearly in awe of the whaling industry, the whales, and their ocean home, and did not especially consider the fate of whale populations. Tilley reported a conversation with Carl Anton Larsen (who died on the voyage):

I asked him if he did not think the whales would be altogether exterminated if they were assailed on such a huge scale. “There is no chance of that,” he replied. “There are thousands upon thousands of big blue whales . . . There are enough whales to keep the whalers going for many years to come.”

(Tilley, 1925b)

For the attentive reader of *The Mercury*, this reported conversation came soon after reports of a lecture by Sidney Harmer – the recently retired director of the London Natural History Museum – warning that ‘unlimited whaling had invariably resulted in the reduction of the number of whales to a vanishing point’ (Anon., 1925).

Tilley, like Mawson and Villiers before him, was also journeying in a wirelessly activated ocean. For the readers of *The Mercury*, he explored the limits of both

the Ocean to their south and the technological challenges of reaching its full extent. While the *James Clark Ross* was anchored in Discovery Inlet, their wireless, ‘splendid set though it was,’ as Tilley put it, ‘was practically useless . . . The ice seemed to have a tremendous deadening effect upon the wireless waves, and it was quite impossible to pick up Awarua (the New Zealand high power station . . .)’ (Tilley, 1925c). Yet in other parts of the ocean, the wireless was a powerful tool of placing themselves in time and space. They could hear broadcasts from Melbourne and Sydney, and news broadcast from New Zealand and other stations ‘was intercepted and issued on board in bulletin form’ (Tilley, 1925d).

* * *

At the end of the 1920s, while some young Tasmanians followed in Villiers’ wake to join the Norwegian whalers, Douglas Mawson returned to the Antarctic. In late 1929, after years of lobbying and planning, he set sail on the first of two planned summer cruises for the British Australian New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE), which he commanded. The expedition’s driving purpose was discovering new lands and claiming them for Australia. The possessiveness of earlier years thus moved into a formal register. And with that shift in frame, the fellow workers and neighbours of the Southern Ocean – the proud ‘Norsemen’ that Villiers wrote of, among others – became competitors.

The drama of competition and boundary-making in the ocean animated the public’s appreciation of BANZARE. Its first cruise – aboard *Discovery*, the ship built for Robert Scott’s first Antarctic expedition (1901–4) – began in Cape Town in October 1929. Before embarking, Mawson faced a press storm that imagined a race to claim Antarctic territories between him and the Norwegian Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen commanding the *Norvegia*, a sealing vessel refitted for exploration. Newspapers in Australia, Britain, and further afield covered the supposed race. Mawson left port without meeting any Norwegians, but with the expectation that he would encounter them somewhere in the Southern Ocean (Price, 1962, pp. 25–27). Almost three months later, on the evening of 14 January 1930, at about 47° east longitude, *Discovery* met *Norvegia*. Riiser-Larsen had hitherto been a telegraphic spectre. Cables had been arriving from early January advising Mawson of Riiser-Larsen’s territorial claims along the Antarctic coast; those cables also advised that the Norwegian government had disavowed the claims (Price, 1962, pp. 60–70, 74). Only the day before, Mawson and a party had finally stepped onto land – an island just offshore from the continent – to take possession of their discoveries with a formal ceremony (Price, 1962, pp. 70–72). When their ships met along the edge of the pack ice, Riiser-Larsen came aboard *Discovery* to talk of his exploratory work. A friendly encounter, they met to partition the ocean and their spheres of interest and influence; *Discovery* would return to the east and *Norvegia* to the west (Mawson, 1930, pp. 550–551). Wireless radio carried reports of the meeting, the boundary making, and the atmospheres of encounter to newspapers around the world.

Both Mawson and Villiers activated the Southern Ocean as a place continuous and simultaneous with the Australian continent and nation. When the Australian government proclaimed the Australian Antarctic Territory in 1933, the Southern Ocean became a space connecting formalised territories of government control. In his presidential address to the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science in 1935, Mawson made it clear that the biological riches of the region ought to be exploited, but that only effective possession, with systems of ‘wise control and development’, could prevent it being ‘raped’ and being ‘left for ever desolate’ (Mawson, 1935, p. 33). For Mawson, Australia, as a core member of the British Empire, was naturally the one to possess and protect. Villiers’ and Mawson’s words and actions conjured a drama of people, heroes, villains, animals, airs, waters, and sensations that allowed Australians to look south and see an ocean for the taking.

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